

COVID-19 and the Future of Adult Education: An Editorial

Adult Education Quarterly

1-4

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DOI: 10.1177/0741713620925029

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We live in unprecedented times. COVID-19 has shutdown large sectors of the economy, as well as entire education systems. Estimates from UNESCO¹ show that around 90% of the world's students are currently out of school. Like many of you, we are working from home, drafting this editorial from our home offices under shelter-in-place orders. Around the world, university campuses are closed and lecture halls stand eerily empty. Teaching and learning has moved primarily online, and the use of remote video conferencing has become commonplace. These changes have also affected adult education programing, much of which relies on face-to-face activities. The Adult Education in Global Times conference planned for June in Vancouver, British Columbia, was cancelled, along with other important professional events across the world. Although we cannot predict the future, we can reflect on how this situation might play out for adult learners. In doing so, we discuss some of our concerns and explore what we see as potentially interesting developments. We reflect on how COVID-19 might affect not only policy and practice but also research agendas for years to come.

Among numerous concerns, the social and economic vulnerability of many adult learners has been dramatically foregrounded, highlighting the social inequalities that continue to characterize much of our field. As many services close and social distancing practices continue, difficult-to-reach and underserved populations face further obstacles to adult education. Leading surveys like the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)² show that adults with lower levels of education, lower paying jobs, and lack of or insufficient employment are least likely to participate in adult learning. Similar patterns hold for the aging adult population. The global pandemic will likely exacerbate and compound learning barriers for these groups. Just as COVID-19 is heavily affecting communities of color, so too will it disproportionately affect densely populated and low-income neighborhoods, elder-care living facilities, and regions with poor public health and medical infrastructure—the same populations that often suffer from limited educational and training resources that are most needed during a recovery. Just as one example, the Native American Diné communities across three U.S. states are suffering proportionally much higher infection and death rates from COVID-19 while grappling with the least number of resources to protect and heal their communities.³ Constantly updated statistics are revealing wider contagion and higher death rates among people from ethnic minority backgrounds in Western countries.

Even while large sections of the world economy stall, many low-paid workers such as supermarket employees, food delivery drivers, frontline health care professionals, and long-term care facilities staff continue working, often without personal

protective equipment. This increases their likelihood of becoming infected and contributes to potential financial, employment, and health care loss. Worldwide, much of our low-paid, part-time, and seasonal work is done by migrants, an often overlooked group of adult learners. It will be important for adult education practitioners and researchers to document and investigate how these groups cope with the aftermath of the crisis. Will wages rise for the current “essential” workers? Will they receive more opportunities or support for work-related and personal development? Will society hold onto the idea that these individuals and populations were the everyday heroes who kept essential services going in service to larger society? Will barriers for career development be lowered?

While many adults continue to work, the International Labour Organization (ILO)⁴ estimates that around 80% of workers have been affected by the pandemic and that labor markets will likely suffer. In the United States alone, within a 4-week period, over 20 million adults filed for unemployment, with more anticipated as the economic standstill continues.⁵ Businesses under pressure include restaurants, retail, transportation and commodity supply chains, sales, leisure, and tourism. Many companies are laying employees off temporarily to save their business, and others are requiring their employees to reduce working hours. Small and medium enterprises are especially vulnerable, as are the self-employed and those earning a living in the “gig economy.” These vanishing jobs may not return when economies reboot, requiring many adults to return to school, upskill, reskill, or seek new occupations. Within the economic phase to come, adult learning will undeniably be changed, and our adult education community will need to respond and work to understand the evolving dynamics. Worth noting is that many adult educators themselves are economically vulnerable. Our field’s practitioners often work part-time for low pay and minimal benefits, and their organizations are predominantly soft-funded through grants and donations. In the aftermath of COVID-19, we must remain vigilant that the profession of the adult educator is not in jeopardy.

Nowadays, nearly 75% of adult education is related to the workplace. As highlighted by the Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education, adult education is currently positioned as a way to serve economic needs. Those with stable, high-wage jobs have regular opportunities for learning and professional development, whereas opportunities for those with the greatest need for education and training are limited. It will become increasingly difficult for smaller companies to fund learning activities, whereas larger multinational companies with human resources departments and training specialists will fare better. Still, will education and training remain a priority when these companies financially struggle? What directions will the labor market take, and what skills and tools will be needed to climb out of these economic conditions? What—if any—programs will public employment services and publicly funded educational programming organize to help the unemployed return to the labor market? So far, government and state leaders’ responses have varied dramatically. Some countries have provided a basic income to families in the interim, whereas others distribute one-time relief checks based on qualification criteria.

In response, our own engagement with teaching has largely shifted online in recent weeks. This situation yields risks as well as opportunities. We live in a society with a pernicious digital divide, and while technology might be a suitable way to facilitate adults' learning in some circumstances, not everyone has reliable access to an Internet connection nor the digital literacy skills to engage in self-directed learning in a virtual environment. eLearning can further serve to disadvantage the most vulnerable groups in society. While platforms like Coursera⁶ have lowered paywalls and made eLearning modules free during stay-home-mandates, chances are this availability will lead to a "Matthew effect⁷," where education often serves the already highly educated adults. Many adults rely on their mobile phones as their primary source of Internet access, often with limited data plans. They are likely to use their data to file for public services, search for jobs, or help their children with their schooling. Older adults might be even harder to reach now. Their access to learning opportunities may be further restructured at a time when access to information and learning is most vital. The current situation has also been challenging for many of us who have research and service responsibilities in addition to teaching. Although some can work from a home office, access to critical resources and competing personal and family responsibilities may considerably affect productivity. Many of our colleagues may not feel well-prepared for digital education, and institutions and workplaces might have to engage with online modes of working and telecommuting more than they are accustomed to. It will be important to capture and learn from these experiences. They may offer prospects for research. It will also be fascinating to see how far learning and work shifts toward online and distance modalities once the world begins to recover from COVID-19. In what state will we find our universities and adult education centers? Will they offer more online courses, or increase the proportion of digital literacy skills as part of their learning programs? What will adult education's place be in responding to the massive reorganization of the workforce? How are adult educators themselves responding to and coping with this situation? Are freelancers and those independent training specialists well protected? What will the impact of the crisis be on different service modalities?

With many adults at risk of losing their jobs, the need to upskill and reskill across the lifespan is becoming painfully obvious. Will the 2020 global pandemic present opportunities for elevating adult learning and restructuring adult education practices and policies in more equitable and efficacious ways? Adult education should be at the forefront of providing everyone with a fair chance to develop their abilities and to put them to valuable use. This can be done both in the community and in the workplace and needs to be supported by governments across the world in a bid to heal economic and social wounds. With leading tertiary education institutions set to lose tuition and fee paying students as a result of continued travel restrictions or delays in the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, universities and colleges might need to develop alternative ways to serve local communities. This may come through continuing professional development, evening classes, and clearer pathways into living-wage employment and higher education.

It is our hope that during this trying time, adult education can be a force for connecting people who, after months of social isolation and physical distancing, may

recognize more than ever the value of supportive networks and solidarity among members of society. The developmental aspects of adult education remain a critical part of adult education, and they too will be increasingly important to explore in the coming months.

As ever, we welcome your contributions and appreciate your efforts in peer reviewing for our journal. We hope to see insightful and evocative manuscripts addressing the multitude effects of the global pandemic 2020 and related topics in the future and welcome these.

Your currently serving AEQ editors.

Ellen Boeren
University of Glasgow, UK

Elizabeth A. Roumell
Texas A&M

Kevin M. Roessger
University of Arkansas

Notes

1. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>
2. <http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/publicdataandanalysis/>
3. The *Washington Post* (2020, April 4). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/04/04/native-american-coronavirus/>
4. https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_740893/lang-en/index.htm
5. *Fortune* (2020, April 9). <https://fortune.com/2020/04/09/ureal-unemployment-rate-jobless-claims-this-week/>
6. <https://www.coursera.org/promo/public-health-free-courses>
7. For a fuller discussion, see Boeren's (2016) "Lifelong learning participation in a changing policy context: An interdisciplinary theory" (<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137441829>).